

Alternatives Fact Sheet

Increasingly, schools and communities are working together to incorporate recreational, enrichment, and leisure activities into their approach to prevention. Drop-in recreation centers, after-school and weekend programs, dances, community service activities, tutoring, mentoring, and other events are offered in these programs as alternatives to dangerous activities, such as substance abuse and violence. While many alternative approaches have not been evaluated with rigor, researchers have learned some valuable lessons about elements that increase an approach's likelihood of success.

Alternative strategies are most likely to be effective if they do one or more of the following:

- Target youth at high risk who may not have adequate adult supervision or access to a variety of activities
- Target the particular needs and assets of individuals
- Provide intensive approaches that combine many hours of involvement with access to related services

Researchers conclude that alternative approaches alone are not enough to prevent substance abuse among youth. Enrichment and recreational activities must be paired with other strategies that have been proven effective, such as policies that reduce the availability of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, as well as social and personal skill-building instruction. Nevertheless, certain alternative approaches have proven to be successful in meeting the needs of young people at risk—the following, in particular:

- *Mentoring programs* related to reducing substance use and increasing positive attitudes toward others, the future, and the school
- *Recreational and cultural activities* associated with decreasing substance abuse and delinquency by providing alternatives to substance use
- *Community service* associated with an increased sense of well-being and more positive attitudes toward people, the future, and the community

One way to ensure that activities interest and meet the needs of young people is to involve them directly in creating the activities and in selecting community service opportunities.

Alternatives Illustration

An Intergenerational Program for Middle-School Students Combines Mentoring, Classroom Lessons, and Community Service

Across Ages is a school-based, intergenerational program in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, that has found ways to bring young students together with older adults and with their parents, siblings, and other family members. Targeting sixth graders at high risk, it seeks to increase resiliency and reduce the likelihood that students will drop out of school, become adolescent parents, or use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. The core feature of the program is the *mentoring* component: recruiting and training older adults (age 55 and up), and matching them as mentors with sixth grade students. Empirical evidence demonstrates that mentoring has a positive effect on young lives. Mentors can help youth overcome personal and social barriers, expose them to new relationships and opportunities, and assist in the development of problem-solving and decision-making skills. "We provide fairly intensive in-service training for our mentors," says Andrea Taylor, principal investigator at the Center for Intergenerational Learning, Temple University. "Then we match them with the students and very carefully monitor the relationships during the course of the school year."

Trained teachers implement the *classroom* component with students once a week for 26 weeks. The Social Problem Solving and Substance Abuse Prevention modules of the *Positive Youth Development Curriculum* address such topics as stress management, peer resistance skills, and substance abuse and health information.

The *community service component* arranges for students to visit with residents in nurs-

ing homes, in keeping with the program philosophy about understanding people across the life span. Students become providers of service to their elder partners in the nursing home, as well as the recipients of service from their mentors.

The *family component*, which involves parents, siblings, and other family members of the students in regular weekend activities, is a way of helping families support the mentor-youth relationships and also get them involved in positive activities with their children.

Evaluations over three years show that youth in the full program were absent fewer days of the year and demonstrated greater improvements in their attitudes toward school, the future, and the elderly; their knowledge of older people; their sense of well-being; their reactions to situations involving drug use; and their performance of community service.

"Across Ages is a wonderful program," concludes Taylor, "and I think it's had a tremendous impact on the lives of many, many children and many, many adults. It can work in a school setting, it can work as an afterschool program, it can work in a community setting. It can work in a church setting, and, as such, I think it has a very important place in a community's prevention plan. I also believe that it's one strategy, and that for a community to really address its drug prevention issues, or any number of things that it has to, programs have to be incorporated as part of a broader design."